

CHILD MARRIAGE;

The Curse of India.



.....BY.....

MRS. ADA LEE,

CALCUTTA, INDIA.

Child Marriage;

The
Curse
of
India.

*

BY
MRS. ADA LEE.

*

Childhood is said to be the happiest period in life. So it should be. Every child has the right to be born happy. The sunshine of love is as necessary to the development of the child's nature as the sunlight is to the unfolding of the rosebud.

But how different is the fact! Those who suffer the most in India are the little children. They are the victims, not only of bad food, impure air, and neglect, but also of superstitious fear and the vilest practices of Hinduism! Oh, the cruelty suffered by little girl wives, the hunger and thirst of Child-widows! May God look in pity upon the suffering masses of little children in



CHILD WIVES; AGES 8 AND 9 YEARS.

this great city! (Calcutta.) How my heart has gone out for the children of India! How many times has it been made to ache by what I have seen and known of their suffering and yet so helpless to relieve them. How I thank God for the movement set on foot to day for the prevention of this cruelty!* I have had little to do with it, but I feel it as an answer to a prayer of mine which has been going up to the Throne for years.

The second article in the proposed constitution of this new society could not be better worded. It is as follows:

“The object of the society shall be the protection of children in India from ill-treatment of every kind involving injury to their life, health or morals.”

We are all more or less familiar with the glaring cruelty practiced by beggars, and designing parents with children on the street, compelling them to go half starved that their petitions for alms might be more effective; or exposing crippled and deformed children to the rain and cold, in order to work on the sympathies of the public. Many of us living on Dhuramtolla Street last cold season had to listen to the wail of two children lying on the cold ground without clothing, until ten o'clock at night, begging for food, and should they cease their cries they were beaten by some one hidden in the darkness near by. We have even known of cases where children were purposely crippled or starved for this purpose. Another traffic enough to stir the heart of any lover of children and innocency is that carried on in all the large cities of India—of kidnapping little girls from the bathing ghats, and from off the streets, and selling them into houses of ill-fame.

* This paper was given at the inaugural meeting of the Society for the protection of Children in India, August 12th, 1898.



THREE LITTLE CHILD WIVES.

But there is a far more wide-spread cruelty than any of these I have mentioned. The greatest enemy to childhood and womanhood of India, and a more deadly foe, because so entrenched in the strongholds of the customs and false religion of the people of this land. I mean the diabolical system of Child-marriage.

I feel, friends, after studying this question for twenty years, that there is no hope for India, no hope for the men of Bengal, for this is an enemy to noble manhood, as well as womanhood—no hope for the church in this land until this awful monster is destroyed! How is this to be done?—What can this Society do?—Are questions, as yet unanswered. But the first thing is for us all to SEE and FEEL the great need, and to create a sentiment among Christian people on this subject. One of the characteristics of this great system is its secrecy—its subtlety. So few know of the evils of Child-marriage. It is so hidden away in the secluded lives and the prison homes of the people. And those of us who enter beyond these veils and go down into these homes are so apt to feel that it is a case of the inevitable and nothing can be done. Others, and good people, too, while they regret the state of things, think it is absolutely necessary, owing to the existing conditions of society in this country. But, friends, is there hope of quenching fire by continually adding fuel? Is there any hope of raising a people morally by feeding their lusts? Can any good come from a system, though sanctioned by law, that sacrifices health, innocency and purity of childhood, and destroys all hope of physical, moral, and mental improvement of woman, and consequently of her offspring?

But let me give you a few facts. I have not time for other than facts. Let me draw them first from the Hindu community of this city.

During the last four months there have been at least six little Hindu girls married who attend our mission school. Three of them are in the accompanying picture. [On opposite page.] The youngest of these is not seven, and the eldest not more than nine years of age. They represent at least four different castes—one or two belonging to the highest in Hindu society. These little girls were never consulted as to their desire in the matter. One, on hearing that arrangements were being made for her marriage, begged her parents, with tears, to wait another year and let her attend school awhile longer; but without avail. These children never saw nor spoke to the man who was to be their life-long lord and master. The first time they ever beheld him was during the marriage ceremony. If he be blind, crippled, deaf or dumb, tottering with age, or a sensual beast, as he often is, he must be her husband, her god, and she his wife, his faithful devoted servant, and she dare not raise a dissenting voice; thus setting aside the heaven born right of every woman to say who shall be the father of her children. But some will say "This is only betrothal." Those of us who are acquainted with the people and their customs know it is not betrothal. It is binding for life. Should the husband die the next day, she is a widow, bound by all the cruel and senseless rules of Hindu widowhood, and can never re-marry. She may be permitted to return to her father's house a few days after her marriage, and remain some months, or in some cases a year or two, and the girl even allowed to attend school in rare cases, although never regularly; but we also know it is so binding that her husband can claim her at any time and can control her, and her parent's action concerning her. And the law fixing the age of consent at twelve years, many of us know is violated in this city every day of the year.



I have been present at the marriage ceremony and to me one of the most disgusting sights is to see the officiating Brahman priest lift the screaming, frightened child, and by the help of a relative, place her in the arms of the man who is to be her husband, and while two or three strong men (for no woman is allowed present at this part of the ceremony) hold the struggling girl, the priest pronounces the final sentences which make the objecting child his wife forever. Is such a scene anything for a nation to be proud of ? And not only this, but there are scenes hidden away from the eyes of man that cannot be depicted here, which are a disgrace to humanity, and an outrage on innocent, helpless, childhood, which would be punishable by law in the home lands as the vilest of crimes. Many a life is lost that never comes to light, but now and then a case has been made public as was one a few years ago, here in this very city, which caused a great deal of agitation among the people. And we had hoped would result in a genuine reform. But, alas! the same awful cruelty still continues all about us. The system of early marriage is against the better sense of many of the Hindu people. The more intelligent are ashamed of it, and wish it were otherwise. And yet the masses are in favor of it. As the women in the Zenanas often say to us, "Our worst enemies are our own people." It thwarts their own plans. It interferes with physical and mental, as well as moral, improvement. It saps the spiritual life. For there is nothing pure, ennobling nor elevating in it, but, on the contrary, it is the great enemy of the race, causing its deterioration.

I am sorry to say this sinful, cruel custom is not confined to the Hindu community, for Child-marriage is practiced to a large extent among our native Christian people. I wish to speak of three or four cases.

One of the most promising girls in our school, a clinging, affectionate child whom I loved, was taken away and married be-

fore the age of thirteen, to a wicked, good-for-nothing young man. She could not bear to hear his name mentioned and whenever spoken to about the arrangement, she would spend hours in frantic grief, begging her father to allow her to remain in school. I entreated for her; but in spite of all that could be done, she was tied to this man for life, and that, too, by Christian law, and hallowed by Christian ceremony.

That child is now a mother before the age of fourteen, and that, with no consent of hers. Another girl was taken from our school and married in a Christian church in this city, at the age of twelve, and I can show the records to prove her age and the date of her marriage.

A woman, a member of another mission church, who can neither read nor write, is the mother of three children before she is sixteen years old. The life of the eldest child was sacrificed, and well nigh that of the mother's, as is in nine cases out of every ten with Child Mothers. If this is not cruelty to children I do not understand the meaning of the word.

But some of our missionary friends even contend that, owing to existing evils, Child-marriage must be resorted to; that the leading native church officials demand it for the good of the people. And yet those very same friends are one with us in wishing to build up a noble self-supporting church in India. Pray, tell me, how can this ever be done when young girls are compelled to marry at the age of thirteen men who are not able to support them and their children? They have nothing to start with and contract debt at the very beginning from which many never extricate themselves. I know men who earn no more than five or six Rupees (about \$2.00) per month with no hope of ever earning more, who have a family of six or eight children. Think of feeding, clothing, and schooling six children on two dollars per month. It is not enough to feed a dog upon, let alone six human beings. And yet expect such people to support the church. I believe it is



LITTLE DOORGA
THE HINDOO WIDOW

criminally wrong to compel a girl to marry under such circumstances. I know many who are willing to work and would rather do any kind of work to earn their own living than to do it. They often say: "I have seen too much of my own mother's suffering; I have seen my brothers and sisters go hungry too often, to want to go into the same myself."

A girl at thirteen is physically, mentally and morally unfit for the high and holy duties of wife and mother, and no combination of circumstances can make such a sin right in God's sight.

In a village not far from Calcutta I once sat in a Christian church and saw a young girl, said to be in her thirteenth year, led to the altar by her parents and a designing old woman. She was covered with jewels, her face marked very much like a Hindu, and her head bent over and closely veiled with her sarree (Cloth worn for a dress and over the head).

Standing near her was the man, about whom she knew nothing, to whom she had never spoken, who was about to become her husband. She did not even understand the vow she was taking upon herself, and when the missionary put the usual questions of the ritual she made no answer. The native preacher stepped down beside her and told her what to say. Still I could hear no response, though I was close to her side. The native preacher repeated the answer for her, and they proceeded with the ceremony. When they came to joining of hands she did not give her hand. The father stepped up and taking her hand roughly, placed it in the hand of the man and held it there while the missionary pronounced them "Man and wife," adding, "Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder." I thought to myself: "What a farce! What a lie!" Do you call that a contract of marriage? It is simply a prostitution legalized by the State and

hallowed by the church ceremony—and is the curse of our native church.

I was asked to sign the marriage certificate, as a witness, which I refused to do. But, friends, does this early marriage improve the morals of our people?

A man that is impure before marriage, will be after—often living in outbroken sin and sensuality. It does not change a thief to put him inside the walls of a prison; he is a thief all the same. Often this excuse for early marriage is given both by native persons and others—We cannot keep our girls pure. Of course, they think it does not matter so much whether the man be pure or not. Friends, I only know of one way for girls or boys of any country to be kept pure, and that is to get them to Jesus, where they will obtain from Him a pure heart and a changed nature. Such girls and boys will not have to be married in order to be kept pure.

I find a thoroughly converted Bengali girl is as chaste and true and can be trusted the same as a converted girl in any land. The religion of Jesus Christ has not lost its power and is able to do for the people of India just what it has done for sinners of all ages and climes. So let us do all we can to put down the dreadful customs that bind the people, and never lower the Standard of Christ to suit their miserable condition. Let us protect and save the children. Standing by the truth, though earth and Hell oppose, the victory is ours. For—

"Truth, crushed to earth shall rise again;
The eternal years of God are hers.
But Error wounded, writhes in pain,
And dies among her worshippers."